The Influence of Naive Dialecticism on Cultural Differences in Decision-Making

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the research literature addressing the influence of culture-related naïve dialecticism on indecisiveness. We define naïve dialecticism and discuss literature laying out its cultural basis in East Asian cultures with a historical legacy of Confucianism. Next, we discuss research investigating naïve dialecticism as the primary explanatory variable in East-West differences in indecisiveness. Additionally, we examine studies that propose and test variables which are nomologically adjacent to naïve dialecticism and indecisiveness, some of which are thought to moderate and mediate the relationships involving these two variables. These adjacent variables include decision importance, ambivalent attitudes, holding of conflicting emotions, ambivalent attitudes toward the self, post-decision regret, decision difficulty, decision latency, and need for cognition. We also identify salient inconsistencies and contradictions in the literature regarding theory and existing empirical evidence.

Keywords: Naïve Dialecticism, indecision, decision-making, East Asian culture

INTRODUCTION

The process of making a decision--whether common or unique, routine or major--is often marked by difficulty and stress. Such perturbation commonly leads to indecision and some people are highly prone to indecisiveness across diverse occasions (Germeijs & De Boeck, 2002). As a subject of empirical inquiry, indecisiveness is a construct that refers to the degree to which an individual experiences difficulty in making a decision in varying circumstances, including decision reluctance and avoidance. Some indicators of indecisiveness include: failing to make decisions (Rassin & Muris, 2005a), taking longer times to reach decisions (Frost & Shows, 1993), and upsetting emotional reactions, such as having regret for a decision that has been made (Rassin & Muris, 2005b).

In addition to individual dissimilarities, some evidence has suggested that different cultural groups show different levels of indecisiiveness (Tse, Lee, Vertinsky, & Wehrung, 1988). Previous work in Cultural Psychology has raised the possibility that East Asian cultural backgrounds are more inclined to be indecisive when compared to people of European cultural roots (e.g., Mann et al., 1998).

A number of studies have confirmed the general finding that East Asian indecisiveness tends to be higher than that of Westerners. For example, Tse, Lee, Vertinsky, and Wehrung (1988) surveyed business executives from China, Hong Kong, and Canada. Mainland Chinese managers scored higher on indecisiveness in comparison to both Canadian managers and Hong Kong Chinese managers, while the latter two groups did not differ from each other. Mann et al. (1998) compared indecisiveness in university students from Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. Results showed that East Asian students displayed a greater tendency toward decision avoidance behaviors when compared with their Western counterparts.
These East-West differences in decisiveness are thought by a number of researchers to stem from East Asians’ stronger tendency—when compared with North Americans, for example—to view the world around them dialectically, and this impacts their psychological tendencies (Ng & Hynie, 2014), which include indecisiveness. This tendency toward dialecticism is thought to render East Asians more likely than North Americans to look at opposing rationales and honor the truth in each, without feeling the need to reconcile the contradiction (Hamamura, Heine & Paulhus, 2008).

CULTURE-RELATED NAÏVE DIALECTICISM AND DECISION-MAKING

As a research construct, so-called “naïve dialecticism” goes beyond culture-related cognitive tendencies and patterns to include specific lay beliefs that guide behavior, and these are thought prevalent in East Asian cultures (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). There are three principal beliefs held to be at the core of naïve dialecticism (Ng & Hynie, 2015; Ng & Hynie, 2014). First, in the dialectical perspective, the world is seen as constantly changing in an unpredictable and dynamic way. For example, light becomes dark, hot becomes cold, love becomes hatred, with each element changed into its opposite in a perpetual cycling of transformation and reversal (Spencer-Rodgers, Williams & Peng, 2010). This belief leads to an expectation that the status quo will change--Chinese students, for example, show a higher expectation that a given romantic couple will break up, or that childhood enemies will become paramours in adulthood (Ji, Nisbett & Su, 2001). In Western cultures, by contrast, change is regarded as more linear, incremental, and ultimately leading to permanent modifications--as opposed to cycling.

Second, under naïve dialecticism, the world is regarded as full of contradictions and opposing states, which though seemingly inconsistent, can nevertheless be true, and even harmonious, at the same time (Ng & Hynie, 2015). With flux as a given, what is true of a person or thing at one point in time, may not be true at another time. Because change is often abrupt and rapid, contradiction is inevitable and to be expected, and truth is seen to in the middle (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2010). Western cultures, by contrast, hold steadfastly to the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction and the law of the excluded middle, the belief that all propositions must be either true or false and that one truth exists (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Westerners thus seek to reconcile contradictions.

Third, naïve dialecticism includes the principle of holism, that is, viewing things and events in the world as part of an inseparable whole--such that individual parts cannot be understood independently. Holistic thinking emphasizes the big picture over the focal object and the interdependence of all parts within the overarching whole (Peng, Spencer-Rodgers & Nian, 2006). In contrast, Westerners tend toward analytical thinking which emphasizes the breaking down of complex wholes into their component parts for interpretation and evaluation.

Compared with East Asians, Westerners generally operate under very different philosophical assumptions, historically accrued, about life and human nature --and this is no less true in behavioral areas related to decision-making. Westerners are generally held to be less comfortable with contradiction and they associate ambivalence with conflict and tension (Festinger, 1962; Lewin, 1951). Previous research has shown that when thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and actions are incongruent, Westerners experience cognitive dissonance (Thompson, Zanna & Griffin, 1995), which motivates them to ameliorate the tension by resolving the conflict in some manner. Indeed, Western cultures are inclined to be more synthetic in their cognitive orientation. In other words, they consider both sides of an argument and then they start to search for the resolution of incongruity, often seeking some sort of synthesis (Lewin, 1951; Peng & Nisbett, 1999).
There is a consensus in the literature that dialectical thinking varies culturally and that this should impact decisiveness in committing to a given course of action. Some research has found East Asians to have (1) a greater inclination to adhere to both negative and positive aspects of an issue, (2) as feeling less need to resolve these contradictions, and (3) as remaining, therefore, more indecisive compared to European North Americans (Ng & Hynie, 2014).

Another study by Li, Masuda, and Russell (2014) found dialecticism to be a significant factor accounting for differences in decisiveness at both the group and individual level. They selected Hong Kong Chinese and European Canadian, controlling for socioeconomic similarity in order to examine the impact of culture on decision making, without the influence of socioeconomic factors. They found substantial evidence that the cultural concept of dialecticism has a great impact on decisiveness. First, they showed that compared with European Canadians, Hong Kong Chinese are more indecisive and that this cultural difference is mediated by dialecticism. Second, dialectically oriented subjects were found more prone to experience indecisiveness than non-dialectically oriented people.

Third, and perhaps most interestingly, the Li et al. (2014) study found cultural variations to be affected by a decisions’ importance. Prior research has shown that individuals use diverse strategies to make a decision according to the importance of the issue (Ladouceur et al., 1995). Further, individuals’ indecisive tendencies are more connected with less important decisions like dinner decisions in comparison with more significant decisions like career decisions (Germeijs & De Boeck, 2002; Milgram & Tenne, 2000). Li et al. (2014) found no cultural difference in indecisiveness between Hong Kong Chinese and European subjects for decisions which were considered important for the participants, while Hong Kong subjects exhibited a higher level of indecisiveness for decisions with less importance than did European Canadians. Additionally, dialecticism mediated the cultural variation for less important decisions.

Additionally, other research has found that in cultures with greater dialectical thinking, individuals are more inclined to hold ambivalent attitudes and less likely to change them (Simpson & Weiner, 1989). Ambivalence refers to holding both positive and negative orientations toward an object, exhibiting evaluative contradictions, and experiencing opposing approaches, emotions or beliefs--such as attraction and dislike, hatred and love, at the same time, toward an object. Ambivalence can also include a simultaneously positive and negative evaluation toward the self (Spencer-Rodgers, Peng, Wang & Hou, 2004) and/or objects that individuals deal with on a daily basis (Ng, Hynie & MacDonald, 2010). These conflicting evaluations also may be concomitant with a relatively low motivation to resolve the contradiction in assessments (Ng, Hynie & MacDonald, 2012). In addition, research has shown that East Asians are more likely to hold both positive and negative emotions concurrently (Bagozzi, Wong, & Yi, 1999).

Spencer-Rodgers, et al. (2004) found that Asian Americans and mainland Chinese scored higher on “ambivalence” in their attitudes towards self. This study employed a measure of self-esteem and self-evaluations. Obtained scores suggested that East Asians bear contradiction more easily, including positive and negative views of the self--when compared to Western synthesis-oriented cultures. In addition, the impact of cultural differences on self-esteem and well-being was shown to be mediated by naïve dialecticism. Finally, this study found that increased dialecticism was connected to decreased psychological adjustment, defined as the process of balancing conflicting needs, and/or balancing needs which might be threatened by hurdles in the environment.

Ng and Hynie (2015), in a multi-study investigation, explored a number of variables thought closely related to naïve dialecticism. First, they examined how three markers of indecision--including post-
decision regret, decision difficulty, and decision latency (Germeijs & De Boeck, 2002) -- differed between participants of European cultural and East Asian backgrounds in the context of a real decision. They found that East Asian individuals scored higher on the three indecisiveness-related variables than European Canadian. Second, the study examined whether naïve dialecticism mediates the relationship between culture-related, chronic indecisiveness and individuals’ life satisfaction. Results confirmed this expectation, in that higher chronic indecisiveness among participants of East Asian background indeed led to lower life satisfaction, compared to those of European backgrounds--and that the effect on life satisfaction was due to the intervening influence of higher naïve dialecticism among East Asians.

Third, the Ng and Hynie investigation (2015) also established the causal effect of naïve dialecticism on indecisiveness using a consumer choice-related task, and examined whether evaluative ambivalence toward the alternatives moderated this effect. They found that European Canadians primed to invoke a dialectical mindset scored higher on indecisiveness in the consumer choice task, compared to those not primed. Evaluative ambivalence mediated the relationship between priming and indecisiveness. Taken together, the evidence presented in the Ng and Hynie (2015) study makes a pretty robust case that that naïve dialecticism increases indecision and that individuals influenced by cultures with higher naïve dialecticism will exhibit greater indecisiveness.

Yates and colleagues (Yates et al., 2010) examined culture-related deliberative tendencies, a concept not wholly dissimilar to the evaluative ambivalence construct examined by Ng and Hynie (2015), and the role of these deliberative tendencies in indecisiveness. Subjects were required to deliberate between two choices based on their general knowledge. Japanese subjects were observed to spend greater time on each option and mentioned more supporting points for each decision than did European American and Chinese subjects. This was taken as indicating more indecisiveness among Japanese participants. While Japanese participants were more indecisive than American and Chinese participants, the Chinese in this study did not show more indecisiveness than American participants, breaking with the pattern typical in other studies (e.g., Mann et al., 1998). It is worth noting that among studies conflicting with the Yates et al. (2010) study in this regard, some involved Hong Kong Chinese or Canadian Chinese, rather than the mainland Chinese participating in the Yates et al. study. In any event, the existing broader literature on indecisiveness contains a number of cases of conflicting findings, such as this one. Future work, such as the discovery of key moderator variables, for example, may help sort out some of these inconsistencies.

Additionally, Ng and Hynie (2014) explored the potential mediating effects of naïve dialecticism and a variable called “need for cognition” on the relationship between culture and indecisiveness. Need for cognition is a personality trait involving the “inclination to involve one’s self in effortful cognitive activities” (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). Individuals who have a greater need for cognition are more inclined to process issue-relevant information, and their orientations toward a subject are more predictive of their related behavior at a later time (Cacioppo, Petty, Kao & Rodriguez, 1986). Ng and Hynie (2014) found that East Asian Canadians exhibited higher scores on a measure of indecisiveness compared with European Canadians and South Asian Canadians, and that the relationship between culture and indecisiveness was mediated by both need for cognition and naïve dialecticism. This suggests that need for cognition may operate in a manner that is complementary to beliefs that comprise naïve dialecticism--i.e., they may work in tandem to predispose those of East Asian cultural background to indecisiveness.
SUMMARY

In summary, research examining the role of naïve dialecticism in indecisiveness is still in an early, exploratory stage. The results of existing studies are somewhat mixed, as are results for studies investigating the broader question of culture-related influences, in general, on indecisiveness. It is worth noting that the broader literature is still not settled, even on the question of whether East Asian samples are uniformly more indecisive than Western samples. For example, Mann et al. (1998) and Tse et al. (1988) obtained somewhat conflicting results on this question, for example. Thus far, studies investigating indecisiveness have been relatively disparate in terms of samples, study conditions, domains, and study foci, and this may contribute to some of the observed inconsistency in results (Mann et al., 1998; Ng & Hynie, 2014). The lack of comparability in existing studies is a primary hindrance to definitive conclusions in the current early stages of this literature, although this state of affairs appears likely to be improved by future research.

Perhaps the future identification of mediators, moderators, and boundary conditions affecting the relationship between culture-related naïve dialecticism and indecisiveness will help to explain the factors that yield unexpected and ostensibly conflicting results. Even at this early stage, existing work centered on naïve dialecticism has moved beyond establishing differences in culture-related indecisiveness and investigated a number of variables that are thought to be nomologically adjacent and relevant to dialecticism and indecisiveness relationship. These including variables which potentially moderate or mediate the naïve dialecticism-indecisiveness relationship. The respective findings--discussed in this paper--for decision importance, ambivalent attitudes, holding of conflicting emotions, ambivalent attitudes toward self, post-decision regret, decision difficulty, decision latency, and need for cognition, represent exploratory forays and a provide basic insights that can guide future research.

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